

# **The Higher Education Champions programme for looked after children: building capacity through collaboration for mutual benefit**

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## **Introduction**

Salazar et al. (2016: 31), highlighting the paucity of youth transitioning from foster care to higher education (HE), stress ‘the importance of developing and implementing interventions through collaborative processes that involve input from a variety of key players’. This chapter focuses on the collaborations involved in the creation of the Higher Education Champions Coaching programme, a widening participation outreach activity developed to improve access to university for learners in the care of local authorities in London, England. According to Moran and Brady (2010) coaching involves an empowering, strengths-based approach and the setting of individual goals whilst retaining an understanding of external factors as influential. Looked after children (LAC) are particularly under-represented in HE internationally (Mendes et al., 2014) and the programme aimed not only to improve access but also provide better preparation for HE as concerns also included the difficulty that some experienced staying on course, post transition. The collaboration involved staff in seven higher education institutions (HEIs) and seven local authorities (LAs) working as part of an established partnership within Aimhigher London South (AHLS).<sup>1</sup> AHLS works on behalf of all educational sectors to broker impartial information, guidance and support. Gap areas identified by schools, colleges and further education (FE) providers are frequently around the area of transition. Following

some initial discussions between HEIs and LAs, the collaboration was extended to include two additional service providers in order to support the delivery of the programme: Brightside (an online mentoring specialist which could also provide access to bespoke resources) and Kaizen (a community engagement specialist with expertise in working with LAC and also in coaching).

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the need for such collaborative interventions. This is followed by an overview of the coaching programme as a model of collaborative intervention. A discussion of the challenges and opportunities associated with this collaboration then follows.

## **Underpinning rationale**

Internationally LAC are particularly vulnerable to poor educational outcomes and significantly under-represented in HE (Mendes et al., 2014). The English context is often singled out as a case where there has been sustained and substantial investment in efforts to improve long term outcomes, including through the provision of more integrated educational and social support (Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mendes et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the numbers of learners in the care of the LA progressing into HE in England remain disproportionately low, a recent study putting this at 11 per cent (Harrison, 2017). A range of contributory factors has been identified including the continuing influence of circumstances that led to being placed in care, systemic failures, limited access to networks with knowledge of HE and embedded educational underachievement (Jackson and Cameron, 2012; Mendes et al., 2014; Sebba et al., 2015; Harrison, 2017). A key protective factor identified in the literature is access to a supportive adult (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Driscoll, 2013; Mendes et al., 2014; Sebba et al., 2015; Department for Education (DfE), 2016). Nevertheless, high levels of interaction with professionals can lead LAC to become mistrustful of sources of support and these are sometimes experienced as impersonal leading to a preference for those that are more informal (Rogers, 2011; Driscoll, 2013). Salazar et al. (2016) also highlight the importance of: the relationships developed in strengths-based, near-peer coaching models; the value of employing young people with similar

experiences to act as coaches; the potential for these relationships to extend beyond the life of an intervention.

Care leavers are a priority group for the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the regulator that, until replaced by the Office for Students in March 2018, had oversight of widening participation interventions led by HEIs in England. About 80 per cent of HEIs refer to care leavers in their 2015/16 access agreements (DfE, 2016). The majority of this activity is delivered by HEIs in collaboration with schools, LAs and charities but a third of HEIs also mention working in collaboration with each other to target care leavers (OFFA, 2017). While some HEIs have comprehensive and holistic support mechanisms in place, the majority of reported activities focus on the access/admissions stage. For example, 40 per cent target care-experienced students but only 10 per cent offer some form of transition support. A life-cycle approach to transition to HE entails a focus not only on what happens prior to the point when a learner might be actively engaged in making decisions about applying to university but also on what happens to them thereafter (Gale and Parker, 2014). This is particularly important in the case of LAC, who like other less socially advantaged groups may experience non-linear transitions to HE (Rogers, 2011; Harrison, 2017) and experience difficulty adapting to this different environment once there (Martin and Jackson, 2002; Harrison, 2017). Particular concerns include a heightened risk of social isolation and the need to move more quickly to a position of independence as a consequence of having more restricted access to support networks (Martin and Jackson, 2002).

## **The programme as a model of collaboration**

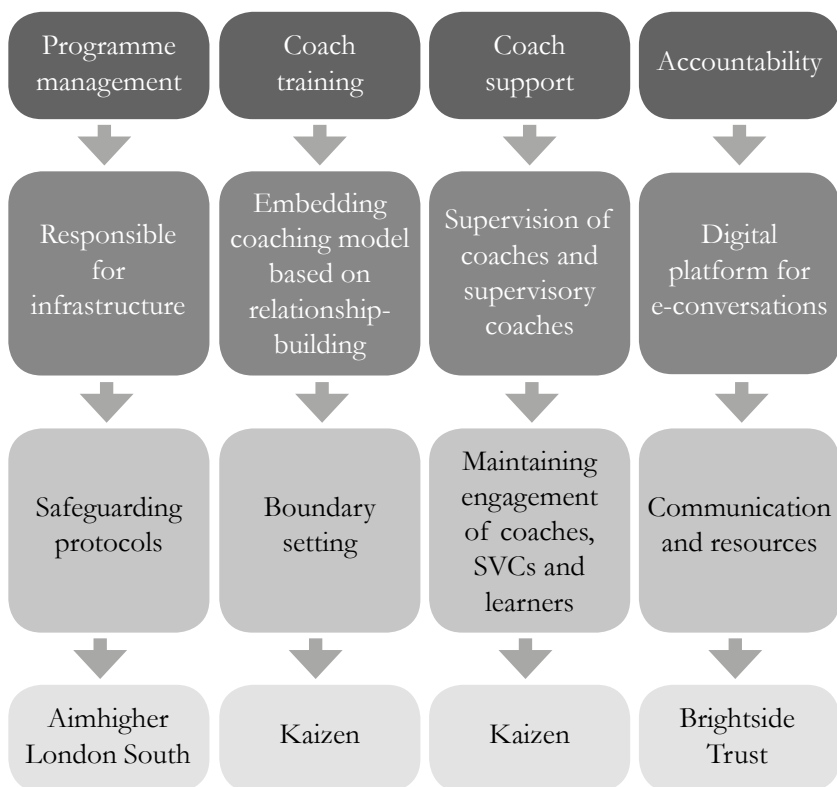
The inspiration for the HE Champions Coaching programme came out of previous positive responses to working with care-experienced ambassadors on AHLS targeted programmes of outreach activity. The nuances of the resulting programme were discussed in the context of the experiences that Virtual School staff had of working with learners closest to the point of applying to university (typically Year 12, aged 17).<sup>2</sup> Aims and objectives were fleshed out through discussion at an initial meeting attended by both Virtual School and HEI staff. These included: achieving developments in confidence and resilience; creative problem solving and independent

learning; awareness of the diversity of progression routes, subjects on offer at university and grades required. As collaborators were looking for an approach that combined flexibility in delivery with a high level of awareness of individual needs, a coaching-based model was selected.

As lead organisation AHLS coordinated the development and delivery of the programme with the relationship between coach and learner being viewed by all as the vehicle for change. Being a coaching programme, it entailed a series of community-based conversations between the learner and undergraduates recruited to act as coaches. As the programme relied heavily on the skills of the coach a robust training programme and supervisory structure was established that ensured access to staff with the necessary expertise to support coaches in safely taking up the role. This involved a pyramid structure where some undergraduates took on the role of coach and worked directly with the learner while others acted as supervisory coaches and were in turn supported by the expert trainer supplied by Kaizen. The programme also involved introductory and celebratory events run by AHLS but led by two Kaizen trainers with expertise in therapeutic approaches to working with LAC. The transparency of the collaboration (being seen to be working well together) and gathering everyone together to acknowledge the involvement of recognisable faces at the beginning of the programme offered an element of consistency and supported the concept and possibility of developing a mutually positive relationship.

Of the 40 undergraduates who initially applied to work on the programme, 15 coaches and 3 supervisory coaches were trained, recruited and matched with 16 learners who then worked together over a 6-month period. Eight of the coaches were either care-experienced or had experienced high levels of social and/or educational disadvantage themselves. Careful consideration was given to their emotional maturity and ability to demonstrate an awareness of their own and others' needs. Matching between learners and coaches was based on a combination of factors that included information collected via referral forms, geographical location and interests. The roles and purpose of providers were structured to support the delivery of the programme as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The collaborative coaching model: roles and responsibilities  
(source: AHLS)



As the emphasis of the programme was to empower the learners through offering them choice, they were encouraged to identify individual goals that they then focused on with the support of the coach. They were also given responsibility for arranging the times and locations of meetings. Although AHLS anticipated the challenges of working to engage what were likely to be relatively small numbers of LAC, the level of resource needed to establish and maintain a more individualised way of working whilst maintaining the desired levels of collaboration was not fully anticipated at the initial planning meeting.

## **Methodology**

The University of Sussex was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the HE Champions Coaching programme to capture its strengths and limitations with a view not only to informing future development but also to identify any differences in the learners linked to the backgrounds of the coaches. Data were collected at the start and the end of the programme with the process involving 31 participants at each stage. They were drawn from across the following participant groups: learners, coaches, LA staff and adults involved in training and delivery of the programme. Sources of data included: questionnaires (all groups); focus group discussion (learners and coaches); observations at key events and interviews (LA staff and trainers). Although it might not be immediately recognised as one of the mutually beneficial collaborations underpinning this programme, the evaluation was developed collaboratively not only to take account of the needs of AHLS and issues such as negotiating access and seeking informed consent, but also to identify appropriate points for data collection – all of which required a degree of flexibility, negotiation and collaboration. Indeed, ethical considerations were central to the design of the evaluation, a particular concern being to ensure that learners should not be deterred from participating in the programme, with consent to participate in the research being understood as something separate and additional. Consequently, a smaller number of learners elected to participate in the evaluation than took part in the programme and it was also not possible to access the perspectives of carers as none in the end attended programme events.

AHLS also took on a monitoring role that provided an opportunity to independently gather additional evaluative data relevant to the identified objectives throughout the course of the programme. This included an opportunity for coaches and learners to reflect together on progress made. While these additional sources have informed the development of this chapter, the data directly presented have been drawn from the independent evaluation unless otherwise stated.

## **Discussion: collaboration for mutual benefit, opportunities and challenges**

The HE Champions Coaching programme presented both opportunities and challenges in relation to the requirement to collaborate for mutual benefit as it entailed a willingness to identify and try new things. What follows is a reflexive discussion of the issues that emerged grouped around these core areas: working together to develop something better, navigating stakeholder relationships, safeguarding and evidencing ‘success’.

### **Collaborating to do things differently**

A major motivation for the programme was the sense that what was currently on offer to LAC under traditional widening participation models was not sufficiently bespoke to allow for informed decision making based on the individual’s specific needs:

Many students find the first year difficult, but if you’ve had trauma it can be much more so. Many of ours have to repeat the first year or change courses. They are very vulnerable because many don’t have a safe place, a family to go back to.... There’s a whole load of things we need to sort out. (LA staff)

In part, the programme came out of LA staff thinking reflexively about these concerns, recognising what they were not so well placed to provide and how these needs could be better met given the particular needs of LAC:

Social workers in our set up didn’t feel equipped to help out much with uni applications or have time to devote to it. I don’t have the time either. Some schools are very good with it and colleges. Others not so. (LA staff)

The young people always ask a lot about finance for uni and I don’t know the right answers. (LA staff)

The aim was to develop a programme sufficiently flexible to foster strong relationships between the learners and the coaches, enabling them to

build their confidence while not only obtaining further information about university but also creating the conditions that might allow them to forge stronger relationships once there. There was therefore a strong sense of there being value in working together to develop something different and the coaching model was seen to provide this:

They really need impartial guidance and to decide for themselves. [Coaches] being younger people means they identify more. A lot of the young people have a lot of professionals involved. We don't really fit the profile of being a young learner in London living on a housing estate. (LA staff)

It was an experiment.... We wanted to test out a different model.... From what I've seen, that did work. We want to develop their own independence and resilience skills to be able to find their own support. (LA staff)

Comments made by both learners and coaches also supported the idea that there had been a different kind of (mutually enhancing) relationship and that this had been valuable:

I mean my coach she was really understanding, down to earth and she knew what I was talking about. (Learner, final focus group)

It's been rewarding to see how far the learners and coaches have come. Practically and emotionally. (Supervisory coach, final questionnaire)

One obvious benefit of the collaboration was that it facilitated the learners' access to someone who had 'walked a similar journey to them' (LA staff): undergraduates closer in age and experience who could share up-to-date experiences of HE from a non-advisory, 'not official' (LA staff), more personal position. One of the care experienced coaches also noted that although LAC routinely encounter many adults who 'care for' and 'care about' them, they come and go making it important 'to enable them to care for themselves' (Coach, focus group discussion).



## **Negotiating and sustaining collaborative relationships**

The programme developed out of conversations with HEIs, LAs and Brightside: ‘Our thoughts were listened to in the planning’ (LA staff). As the idea of a coaching model developed it accommodated an additional organisation, Kaizen, which meant that established working practices were further challenged and adapted. For example, staff in some LAs wanted to attend the training for coaches, and expressed an interest in being involved in the matching process. Some LA staff wanted more information on the frequency of meetings and the content of conversations. Others, however, were interested in the adoption of a less hands on approach: ‘I like it that there’s not too much power exerted from our side’ (LA staff). At this stage the operational complexity of the proposed programme and the nature of the target cohort was daunting for some and it later proved difficult or impossible for some LA staff to identify suitable participants in time:

I led on this and made a huge number of calls but because I don’t have a relationship with [a] young learner or carer it’s difficult to sell. (LA staff)

Marketing anything to people in education is hard as people are busy. (LA staff)

Issues of trust emerged when it was found to be difficult to recruit young people to the programme via the launch events held on university campuses. While some of the participating learners were considered to be highly motivated some LA staff identified a wider challenge:

Opportunities are there but how do we get young people to access them? For me that’s always been the challenge. (LA staff)

Difficulties with recruitment were multi-factorial, reflecting weaknesses within adult communication systems as well as a need for the development of less demanding, more personalised approaches. It became clear that recruitment events would be better held locally in more familiar settings within the participating LAs:

My lad didn't want to go to a group meeting.... I would be intimidated as a young person to turn up at a university event to meet people rather than one on one. (LA staff)

Recruitment difficulties were also compounded by LAC being quite geographically 'scattered' (LA staff). Although some HEIs were initially concerned that the recruitment cycle for coaches did not fit with their internal processes there was far less difficulty recruiting coaches than learners.

Post programme it was clear that the coaching model was considered valuable by coaches, learners and LA staff. However, there was some uncertainty about its cost effectiveness because of the perception that there were more young people who might benefit than actually took part and also whether/how it might be developed for the future. This was in part because of its operational complexity but also because of reduced access to the necessary financial resource:

The university could possibly absorb the cost of someone doing the coaching but what about the coordinating – checking the safeguarding, DBS [Disclosure and Barring Service check], if someone needs to talk something over. That's the expensive stuff. I know previously the supervisory coaches were provided. (LA staff)

From a project management perspective there were some final tensions in relation to the management and coordination of the programme given that accountability to programme partners was the major focus. The focus of the community specialist was on ensuring that the trust and relationships developed in the coaching relationship were maintained. From a project management point of view the coaching relationship ceased at the end of the six-month period. AHLS' experience of working closely with LAs over time facilitated understanding of the value of taking forward Kaizen's recommendations to maintain future contact where there was mutual agreement, extending the life of the project. This tension reflects the importance of developing understandings of the need for more long-term collaborative models of intervention and is interesting given that it

was longer term concerns that informed the initial development of the model.

## **Safeguarding**

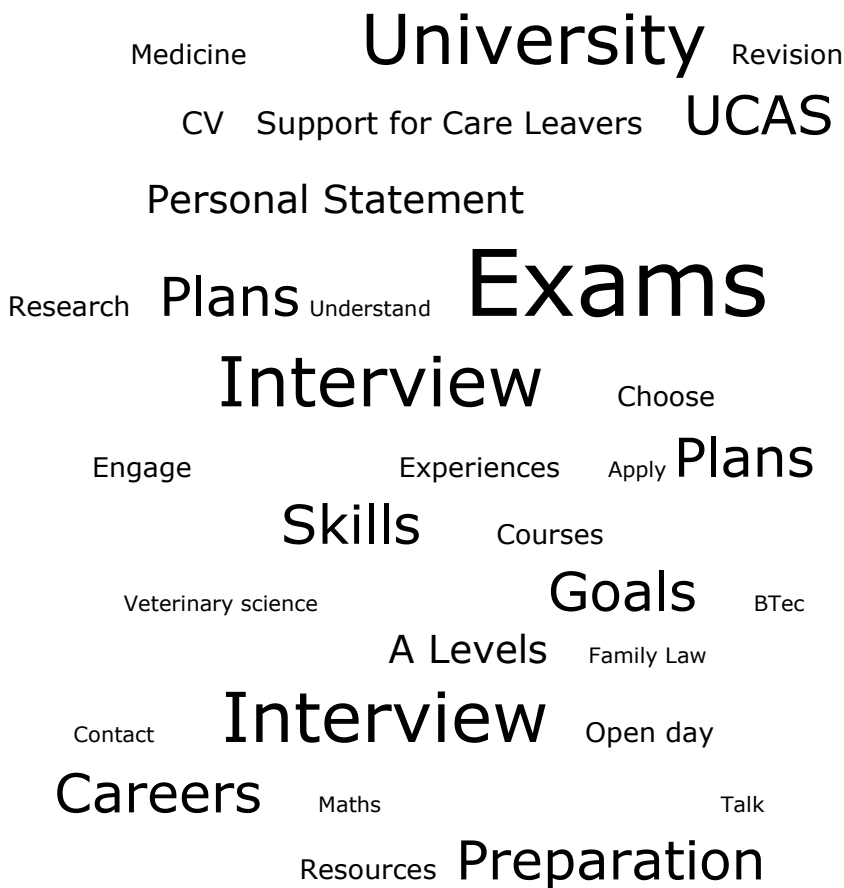
Adults involved in the collaboration needed to pay attention to ensuring that the structures created met the expected standards for care. The task of addressing the safeguarding for the young people had to be conducted on an LA by LA basis and was therefore particularly time-consuming and resource-intensive as it took some time for AHLS to meet the safeguarding requirements of each LA. These assurances were more important given the move from the more structured models of engagement that LA staff were used to towards a more individual, relationship-based approach. It took so long for one LA to embed the programme's safeguarding protocols within their own systems that by the time they had done so, there was no longer a member of staff available to support the identification or involvement of any learner within the programme.

Both coaches and learners had concerns about some of the communication and monitoring processes that were established as they were considered unnecessarily onerous. Coaches also raised concerns around the processes for contacting unresponsive learners. Coaches and learners expressed a preference for contacting one another by phone rather than through the online portal set up for this purpose as it was found to be more immediate and personal:

I felt like he felt like he was restricted if you know what I mean, like he felt he didn't know what was professional or unprofessional, whether to WhatsApp me or tell me or not. (Learner, final focus group)

The preference for telephone contact made it harder to monitor the frequency of communications, however, and did not encourage the learners to make use of the e-mentoring platform in the way that it was intended. An analysis by Brightside of the frequency of the HE-related content of online conversations identified the most talked-about areas of concern.

Figure 2: Frequency of topics of online conversations through Brightside's digital platform (source: AHLS)



The collaborative model and the organisation of the coaching element in particular was found to provide a boundaried approach within which the emotional complexities of working closely with learners in difficult circumstances could be worked through and managed:

The process was the way I thought it would be – the idea of a pyramid scheme. Everyone had a person they could turn to in times of need and for advice. But the structure sometimes fell short and

there was a little confusion in the beginning with roles. (Coach, final questionnaire)

Within this newly evolving model collaborators worked together to ensure a balance between responsiveness and flexibility, and structure and support. Despite the (necessary) emphasis on bureaucratic systems, a reflexive approach ensured that safeguarding concerns were not only addressed at the planning stage but also revisited throughout, including when previously unidentified concerns emerged.

## **Collaborative approaches to evidencing ‘success’**

In England there is an expectation that investment in widening participation interventions will be reflected in evaluative data that enables connections to be made between specific inputs and particular, anticipated outcomes. However, LAC often experience more difficult educational journeys and embedded educational disadvantage (Sebba et al., 2015), these then being reflected in longer and more convoluted routes into HE (Rogers, 2011). The difficulty of evidencing concrete connections due to the complexity of the intersections between the social and the educational were evident in the data:

One of our young people did his A levels and got...better than expected [grades]. He felt that this was partly due to his [coaching]... [there's] a stronger network of support...so it's also partly about his life. (LA staff)

Differences in the current social and educational needs of the young people were also reflected in the goals identified and worked on with the coaches. Many of these related to areas of personal development and not all were directly linked to the more traditional forms of HE advice and guidance identified at the outset as a focus for the programme:

I thought it was about education but it depends on what problem you have in a sense. So obviously you were doing interviews and stuff and for me it was organisation. (Learner, final focus group)

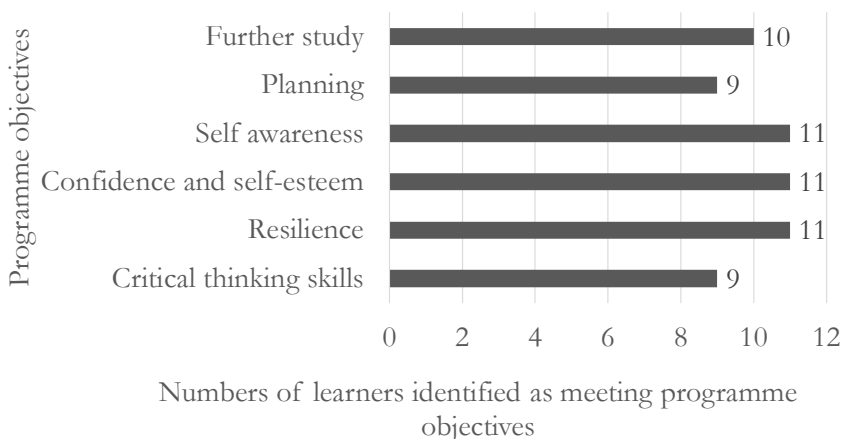
Another complicating factor in evidencing the impact of the programme was that issues with recruitment led to some entering the programme late, contributing to different patterns and levels of support. For example, those attending the final celebratory event received direct input delivered from a position of therapeutic expertise that addressed issues relating to endings and the first few weeks at university.

Despite these variations in experiences, learners and coaches identified the programme as having value, with coaches unexpectedly identifying unexpected benefits to themselves:

Not only will you enrich the life of another, you will also learn a tremendous amount about yourself. Whatever career path you choose, having a high level of emotional intelligence will help you in your path to success. (Coach, final questionnaire)

As a response to interest from the LAs, AHLS requested that coaches undertake their own review of ‘distance travelled’ in the form of a conversation at the end of the coaching relationship.

Figure 3: Numbers of learners identified by coach: achieving programme objectives (source: AHLS)



Another way in which AHLS has assessed the ‘success’ of the programme is through the continued levels of engagement of the learners with their coaches. While LA staff are aware that a number of the learners who participated in the programme are continuing to study at pre-HE level and are unsure how to evidence the connections between the programme and future HE access, staff in HEIs continue to be interested in AHLS monitoring the learners’ HE application paths and exploring how these relate to individual coaches. The complexity and diversity of the learners’ experiences and those of the three providers involved in the delivery of the programme reinforced the value of embedding multiple perspectives not only when developing new models of delivery but also when reflecting on ‘success’.

## **Final reflections**

Widening participation is a complex area of practice and necessarily requires a degree of collaboration because it aims to provide a bridge between current educational experiences and future possibilities in HE. In the case of LAC, staff involved in wider social care are also necessarily involved. Opportunities of the sort provided by the HE Champions Coaching programme are all the more important in the context of the more complex prior experiences of LAC and an awareness that when it comes to making advice and guidance relevant ‘static sources alone are not enough’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2014: 36). The programme was perhaps atypical in terms of the level of collaboration and expertise incorporated but this emerged as essential in securely scaffolding the development of expertise in the coaches employed to work directly with the young people. Those involved in its development and delivery had shared and well-informed understandings of the kinds of support that were needed and how they might best be delivered. Nevertheless the need to revisit and renegotiate roles and responsibilities highlighted the importance of integrating the respective partners on an ongoing basis in parallel to the delivery of the programme.

The LA staff who were interviewed felt strongly that the learners needed access to a different kind of relationship, reflecting in part an awareness that they (and the systems they worked in) were not well placed to

deliver the most valuable kinds of support alone. Looking to the future, the programme has further engaged the HEIs and LAs participating in the partnership. LAs and HEIs recognise the need for a more direct personalised approach and continue to be interested in exploring how to apply insights derived from the experience on the programme more widely. This includes finding ways of better involving carers and other key people who recognise the value of supporting young people in care ‘where they are at’, recognising that routes into HE are not always straightforward. Not all of those selected for the programme finished it in a position to progress to HE immediately but it is quite possible that they, like other LAC, will make the transition at a later date. LA staff have also expressed an interest in continuing to work with undergraduates trained as coaches on an ongoing basis. This reflects a continuing appreciation of the potential value of collaborative working based on mutual recognition of the challenges and opportunities that it presents.

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## **Endnotes**

1. HEIs were the School of Oriental and African Studies, St George’s University, London, Kingston University, Goldsmiths, University of Roehampton, St Mary’s University Twickenham and the Royal Veterinary College; LAs were Hammersmith and Fulham, Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, Wandsworth, Croydon, Merton and Lewisham.
2. Virtual Schools coordinate educational support between foster carers, social workers and designated teachers to ensure that LAC and care



leavers achieve the best possible outcomes wherever their place of learning.

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